

Third Sunday after Pentecost 21 June

Genesis 21 8-21	86 1-10, 16-17	Romans 6: 1-11	Matt 10 24-39
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**God of sparrows and elephants,
of earth and sky,
of the great and the small,
you stand with us when we are hurting,
when we are frightened,
when there is danger.
You are with us today, and always,
loving us and caring for us,**

**As we live in your steadfast love,
may we live boldly, faithfully, and joyfully. Amen.**
-seasons of the spirit online

I imagine many of you may find this Gospel passage as challenging as our Wednesday morning worshippers did and as some of the commentators I read. One noted somewhat despairingly:

“Quite frankly, I'm not sure why this lesson is part of the Lectionary. Where's the Good News? We should not be naive or blind to the warnings given here. We do need to know this. But as a Sunday sermon?” (David Ewart, holytextures.com)

Our use of the Scripture readings set by the Lectionary means we cannot choose to skip over the hard bits, which is not unlike what Jesus is doing in the text. Chapter 10 has Jesus commissioning the 12 apostles, and not skipping over the hard bits.

Matthew is traditionally known as the Gospel-writer who wrote for Greek-speaking Jewish members of the early church somewhere around the 50s-70s. It is helpful to remember that context particularly when we come up against challenging texts about swords: A metaphor for conflict; crosses: A means of torture and execution, and losing one's life.

In these verses, Matthew seems to collect several related sayings of Jesus about committed discipleship in the face of conflict. These truths are rooted in the history of Israel, whose proclivity for persecuting its prophets is well documented, so it is a “no-brainer”: If the prophets were persecuted and Jesus was crucified, then Jesus' followers can only expect similarly rough treatment.

For most First World Christians, this text seems alien, very far removed from our experience. Few – if any – of us have been denigrated for our faith. Our lives have not been in danger because we are believers. We have not been threatened with crucifixion. For most of us, church membership is a comfort and has led to friendships, useful contacts, perhaps opportunities for employment or sales. In other parts of the world it is vastly different.

Similarly, the context of Matthew's audience was very different from ours: By the time this Gospel was written, making a decision to be a follower of Jesus had already caused the conflict in families and the kind of hardship and persecution that Matthew has Jesus describe. Many believers were already estranged from their families because of their faith.

By the time that this Gospel was written, Christians were familiar not only with the cross of Jesus' crucifixion, but also with crosses borne by Christians on the way to their martyrdom.

Jesus did not actively set out to cause rifts in families and create hardship for his followers, it flows naturally from his teaching and following his example. Conflict was not his purpose; he does not call us to provoke persecution or to seek martyrdom (see 10:14). Hardship, perhaps persecution, follows naturally when we are "Little Jesuses" doing what we are called to do and being who we are called to be: When we expose evil, "call out" hypocrisy and corruption, challenge power, and demand change. In essence, undermine the status quo, just as Jesus did. If we are faithful, there is a good chance that we will face opposition in some form, somewhere.

Perhaps the question for us to ponder then, is: "If we don't experience opposition, why is that?" The text contains a possible answer, or a part answer in Jesus' use of the imagery of swallows.

"Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. And even the hairs of your head are all counted. So, do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows."

As the text indicates, sparrows – thought to be a generic term for small birds, similar perhaps "LBJs" in twitcher speak: Little Brown Jobs – were not expensive and prized, but cheap and dispensable. They were bought by the extremely poor as Temple offerings. In humanity's value system, money often determines worth, so sparrows, not commanding much money, are therefore not valuable. However, as Jesus tells it, God knows and cares about each of the millions of sparrows that populate the planet and will eventually die and fall to the ground. What is not valuable to the world is the object of divine love and divine care. What humans consider insignificant, God prizes. Things that we value like wealth, status, power, appearance, career or possessions, seem to be of lesser value to God.

So perhaps the answer to the question: “If we do not experience opposition, why is that?” is another question: “What do we value?”

Part of what God values is obvious from Jesus’ words: In addition to sparrows, it is us. While the world may count money, God counts the hairs on our heads – a symbol of infinite and intimate knowledge and care. If God knows and cares about an insignificant sparrow falling from the sky, how much more does she know and care about us, her children.

That is one of the foundations underpinning the last theme I want to mention, which is particularly relevant to our current Covid-inspired uncertainty: “*So don’t be afraid, you are worth more than many sparrows.*” (verse 31).

In this reading alone, the injunction not to be afraid is repeated twice. Depending on which translation you read, it is one of the most common reassurances offered by God to humanity in all of Scripture.

In the excerpt from the Archbishop’s Pastoral Letter reproduced in the parish news, he writes: “*People are edgy and anxious, tired and frustrated*”. He feels that a major factor of this is grief. I think before grief and anger, comes fear. People are, have been, and will continue to feel afraid, perhaps very afraid, for all the reasons and about all the things that the Archbishop enumerates.

This text speaks directly to our fearfulness offering us reassurance that God knows and loves us, is with us and wants us to trust divine love. The force of the words Jesus uses suggests his intended meaning is: “Stop being afraid”, not just once, but always, words that are a welcome balm for fretting hearts, I hope.

I conclude with a quotation from another preacher on this text:

“The answers to fear, then, include clear-eyed recognition of the façades of human power, ... and especially the deep awareness and conviction that God is present in the world, in mercy and compassion.” (Stanley Saunders, workingpreacher.org)

“There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear.” – 1 John: 4: 18

References:

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